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The Auto Worker Unions and the Auto Industry: A Reading List

by Joe Allen

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The six week strike by the UAW against General Motors ended on Friday, October 25th with a majority vote in favor of the proposed contract. It was the longest strike by the UAW against GM in nearly half a century, and was notable for the widespread media coverage and public sympathy for the strikers.

The union's demands for significant wage increases, job security, and protecting health benefits and pensions clearly resonated with the general public. General Motors' actions over the last year—including the closing of three major assembly plants while reaping record profits and huge tax breaks from Trump—easily made it a target for the rage that many working class and lower middle class Americans feel about their deteriorating living conditions.

Frustratingly, despite the enthusiasm of the strikers and public support, the contract was largely settled on terms more beneficial to GM than to the UAW strikers. The UAW has been weakened by decades of concessions and has become an embarrassment to the entire labor movement because of recent corruption scandals and a very public losing streak in organizing drives in the auto plants, not only in the U.S. South, but also in the Midwest.

These twin crises have raised serious questions about the future of the UAW. But, when 48,000 UAW members walked off the job at GM on September 15th, it sparked a renewed interest in the auto industry and the history of the UAW. It's a funny thing about many Americans, who live in the most car-centered society in the advanced industrial world, that they know very little about the auto industry and the UAW. This is a big reversal from a mere generation ago and reflects the decline in interest in the industrial labor movement and manufacturing, despite the auto industry being central to the U.S. economy.

For today's burgeoning generation of radicals and socialists, their knowledge of the UAW is largely of its heyday in the 1930s, while their knowledge of the auto industry is scant. Most young radicals know the UAW largely through graduate student organizing. The DSA is still formulating and implementing the labor perspectives passed at the August convention. I've put together this reading list in order to take advantage of the renewed interest in the UAW and the auto industry today, and what impact the GM strike may have on our perspectives.

The subject is vast and spans the history of manufacturing since the turn of the 20th Century and it crisscrosses with the history of the syndicalist, socialist, communist, and trade union movements. Issues of race, gender, and national oppression have always been at the center of worker organizing in auto plants going back over one hundred years. Today, the auto industry is at the center of discussions about a Green New Deal and the transition to an eco-socialist society. I hope this reading list can contribute further to that discussion.

A note on sources

Most of the books listed here are available at most central and college libraries. When JSTOR is cited, it is a digital archive available through many public library websites. I've usually given the full name of newspaper and journal sources but in the case of Against the Current magazine, it's listed as ATC.

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